



**Program works to help low-income gifted students** 0:53

Young Eisner Scholars, a program started by a California entertainment lawyer, has started a rural North Carolina branch to help low-income gifted students succeed.

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# What if low-income, gifted students had the same support and connections as their affluent classmates?

BY ANN DOSS HELMS AND JOSEPH NEFF  
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## ZIONVILLE

Thirteen-year-old Seth Greene is so good at math that he's taking a second-year high school class in eighth grade.

So it seems reasonable when he says he hopes to study engineering at Stanford University. But as soon as he names the prestigious California school, he starts backpedaling.

"That's pushing it," Seth says softly. "It's far away and it's hard. It's a long way from home."

That's the mindset Justin Hicks fights every day, as he works with talented students from rural poverty in four Watauga County schools. He's leading the newest branch of YES, or Young Eisner Scholars, a program created by a California entertainment lawyer 18 years ago to help gifted students in urban schools reach their Ivy League potential.

Plenty of groups labor to production executive, dec America's full promise.



er, a lawyer and film poverty and tapping

To do that, he decided, they need the same advantages that bright kids from wealthy families get, such as top-notch schools, tutoring and high-quality summer programs.

“In order for the system to work, for the smart kid to make it up the ladder, he needs an advocate. And not just an ordinary advocate; a high-powered guy with lots of connections who can get you in and watch over you,” author and longtime YES supporter Malcolm Gladwell said in a podcast.



Justin Hicks of YES Appalachia uses red Solo cups to help Brelyn Sturgill, left, and Aubry Spaulding work out a “math story” about saline solution.

Ann Doss Helms | [charlotteobserver.com](http://charlotteobserver.com)

Providing those advantages isn't cheap. YES spends about \$40,000 per student, following them from sixth grade through college graduation and career placement. And the group uses its connections to provide each student with an average of \$300,000 in scholarships for enrichment programs and college.

YES graduates from Los Angeles, where the effort began 18 years ago, have earned degrees from Harvard, Yale and other universities and started careers in law, medicine, business, engineering and technology.

## Is rural poverty different?

After its start in Los Angeles, YES expanded to New York and Chicago. In all three cities, the program works mostly with black and Hispanic students living in dire circumstances and dangerous neighborhoods. The goal is often to get them out of unstable, dysfunctional public schools and into private prep schools.

It's different in Watauga County, where families who have lived in the mountains for generations are neighbors to affluent resort communities and Appalachian State University.

An advertisement for One A Day vitamins. It features three boxes of vitamins: Hello Kitty, Batman, and Trolls. A blue banner at the bottom says "SAVE \$2". On the right, there is copyright information: "HELLO KITTY: ©SANRIO, TROLLS: © 2016 DWA LLC., BATMAN: TM &amp; © DC Comics. (s16)".

## SEARCH YOUR DISTRICT

The table below shows the rates at which the highest-achieving students get into advanced classes. "Top-level 3rd graders" is the number of 3rd graders in 2014 that scored the highest level (5) on their end-of-grade math test followed by the percentage that were labeled gifted in math in 2015. "Top-level 5th graders" is the number of 5th graders in 2012 that scored the highest level (4) on their end-of-grade math test followed by the percentage that took high school math, Math 1, in middle school. Each district has a rate for low income and higher income students, and the total rate. Districts that did not have at least 10 students in a particular category are indicated with "<10".

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School district ▼	Economic status	Top-level 3rd graders	Gifted Math Rate	Top-level 5th graders	Math 1 Rate
Alamance-Burlington	Higher Income	115	67.8	245	88.2
Alamance-Burlington	Low Income	35	48.6	119	71.4
Alamance-Burlington	Total	150	63.3	364	82.7
Alexander County	Higher Income	46	60.9	55	78.2
Alexander County	Low Income	22	40.9	38	42.1
Alexander County	Total	68	54.4	93	63.4
Alleghany County	Higher Income	11	45.5	15	93.3
Alleghany County	Low Income	<10	NA	<10	NA
Alleghany County	Total	17	41.2	17	94.1
Anson County	Higher Income	<10	NA	16	93.8

Showing 1 to 10 of 349 entries

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Note: Includes only those students who remained in the same district all years and who were labeled with the same economic status all years.

Source: N&O analysis of N.C. Department of Public Instruction data ([Get the data](#))

Hicks, who grew up in Mount Olive and graduated from Appalachian State, interned with YES and pitched the idea of expanding to a mostly white rural area, where access to top academic programs can also be limited. The university was already working with Watauga County schools, so YES joined the partnership.

Here, says Hicks, public schools are good. And families are often comfortable – too comfortable – with the way things are.

“These kids can go on cruise control and they’ll be fine,” Hicks says of the high-fliers who are chosen for YES. His mission is to persuade them that cruising won’t cut it if they want to compete with students around the world.

In that regard, urban and rural students of poverty face similar challenges. Being a star student, especially if it comes easily, can create the impression that bright kids are barreling toward success. But soon enough they meet equally smart students with a wealth of life experiences and a team of tutors, coaches and connections to help them get ahead.

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“We try to be that whole team of private coaches,” Hicks says. And lesson No. 1 is: “Work your butt off.”

Watauga County has eight elementary schools that serve grades K-8, all of which feed into one high school. That means each class is small – Mabel Elementary, for example, has fewer than 20 eighth-graders – so students don’t have as many advanced classes as they might in a larger school.

## Why math matters

Students are chosen for YES in sixth and seventh grade with a two-  
start the summer before journalism.



The common thread, according to YES leaders, is those disciplines all teach language to make sense of the world. At YES, advanced math is seen as a path to college success, but it isn't taught in terms of calculating the right answer to pass a test. Most of these students can do that easily already.

[Learn More](#)

Podcast: Malcolm Gladwell's "Carlos Doesn't Remember," on YES and the challenges of gifted students from disadvantaged backgrounds
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Instead, they're pushed to write math "sentences" that tell a story. On a recent afternoon, Hicks asked two seventh-graders at Mabel Elementary to tackle a challenge from the GRE, an exam taken by grad-school applicants. He used red Solo cups to set it up: If you have one cup filled with 10 percent saline solution and another filled with 15 percent saline solution, what mix will you need to create 200 milliliters of 12 percent solution?

They wrote formulas on a whiteboard, ran numbers through their calculators and concluded you'd need 120 milliliters of 10 percent solution and 80 of 15 percent solution. Aubry Spaulding, 13, and Brelyn Sturgill, 12, spent their lunch break doing math, but they say this work is more fun than regular classes.

"It's like the sun rises, slowly. Math is a sunrise," Aubry said. "We teach ourselves."

"He pushes us to our limits," Brelyn added.

## Stretching their minds

YES works with 40 seventh- and eighth-graders in Watauga County. The plan is to stick with them as they move into high school and college, helping with applications and financial aid. But for now, while they're in middle school, Hicks pushes them to think big and embrace challenge.

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Two Watauga YES students have gotten into a summer program at Phillips Exeter Academy, a New Hampshire boarding school, with financial aid covering most of the cost. Two others got scholarships to summer programs offered by the Duke Talent Identification Program. Four will fly to a San Francisco college awareness conference; for most, it will be their first time on an airplane.

And YES is bringing rising ninth-graders from its other three locations to join the Watauga students for a 10-day program at Appalachian State. When the subject came up in April, Seth, the 13-year-old, and his friend Shayne Scott voiced trepidation. Hicks had told them they'd be assigned roommates from the other cities.

"What is this about the New York people?" Shayne asked.

Seth rolled his eyes. "Can we room with each other? What happens if they're weird?"

While the national buzz has been about getting students into Ivy League schools, Hicks says that's not the only sign of success.

"The ultimate goal," he said, "is really for them to be the most interesting individual who will challenge themselves."

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14 Comments

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**Matthew Seneca**

I admit that the numbers don't lie and are well worth examining, but in three extensive articles, why on earth didn't the authors interview a public school teacher in more depth? (Hicks is not one.) I see a couple of brief quotes, and only one that speaks to the central ideas of the series. Aren't the teachers' perspectives on this issue more relevant?

Like · Reply · May 26, 2017 12:42pm · Edited



**Machelle Peebly** · UNC Charlotte

I'm able to give my son the best education money can't buy. I homeschool. My biggest obstacle, the State of North Carolina.

Like · Reply · May 23, 2017 6:50pm



**Samuel A. Begley**

Common sense: successful (rich) people know what it takes to be successful and pass that knowledge to their children. Rich people are rich because they are smarter than poor people who are stupid and/or lazy 99% of the time. Studies prove this theory to be true. Government will never fix this problem (its not even really a problem, its nature).

Like · Reply · 1 · May 23, 2017 11:14am · Edited



**Sherrie Smith** · Queens University of Charlotte

My experience with 38 years of teaching was that the low-income students got the most attention and services. They needed it more! I always felt like the average intelligence and income child was the one that was cheated in our system!

Like · Reply · 2 · May 23, 2017 9:44am



**Thomas Wright** · Charlotte, North Carolina

So the liberal run schools discriminate?

Like · Reply · May 23, 2017 9:15am · Edited



**James Smith** · Saskatoon, Saskatchewan

Hard for parents to step up when food, water, housing, safety take precedence. We can always talk about outliers but the situation is that it is extremely hard to rise out of poverty. That is why we applaud those who do. If we could make a difference in an incremental 10% to 20% of kids it would have an enormous impact. I still think the best approach is to not impose hard thresholds on schools that are disadvantaged and allow schools with increased poverty levels to assign a set percentage of kids to gifted programs.

This would not take away anything from the middle class but it could make a serious impact on the number of children from poverty who are ready for college.

Like · Reply · May 23, 2017 9:13am



**Steve Lira** · Central Piedmont Community College

Do they have smartphones? Big Tv's? Cable? Oftentimes nice cars?

Like · Reply · May 23, 2017 2:01pm



**Michael Ealey**

Above it all, step up parents.

Like · Reply · 1 · May 23, 2017 7:16am



**Dan Taylor** · Works at Self

One small thing that would help - vouchers! However, the liberal left shot them down because if vouchers were successful, then they, the liberals, might actually lose a bit of the power that they need to get votes in their next elections...

Like · Reply · 1 · May 23, 2017 7:05am



**Alan White** · Davidson, North Carolina

Do you not see the problem of somebody like DeVoss who makes millions from private education promoting vouchers for students to go to private schools?

It's been shown that, for the most part, impoverished kids aren't taking advantage of school vouchers in states where they're offered. I believe Indiana is an example.

Like · Reply · 3 · May 23, 2017 8:47am



**Steve Lira** · Central Piedmont Community College

Alan White. Alan. The Public schools are not working out for America. We are falling behind.

Like · Reply · May 23, 2017 2:02pm



**Steve Lira** · Central Piedmont Community College

"Unstable, dysfunctional public schools." This is why we need choices. One size doesn't fit all. Especially if the primary goal is to protect unions.

Like · Reply · 1 · May



**Bob Jeffers**

No teachers

Like · Reply ·

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**Steve Lira** · Central Piedmont Community College

Bob Jeffersonian. There are elsewhere. The problem is that Democrats have been in charge of public schools for decades. The schools are a disaster. We need to try something else.

Like · Reply · May 23, 2017 1:58pm



**Catherine Rose Toots** · Pharmacy Technician at CVS Pharmacy

As a former gifted student, it shouldn't surprise anyone that these programs are often the first things cut due to budget shortfalls/politics/other needs in the school system. This has been regardless of political affiliation, locality, state or region of the country. Gifted programs should be expanded not eliminated if our country wants to "catch-up" with the rest of the world. These programs will provide the enrichment these kids need to develop into our future leaders and thinkers of the country. We need to elevate our school systems so that the gifted programs are "regular classes" ... See More

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**Bob Jeffersonian** · Works at Self-Employed

And then there is my generation when no such programs existed, and we created the world that you live in. We cleaned the air, the water, created the backbone of the technology that you use today and the list is long.

Like · Reply · 2 · May 23, 2017 7:14am



**Bob Jeffersonian** · Works at Self-Employed

I do agree that we spend too much time on EOGs, instead of actually expanding our children's minds. But when 25% can hardly read and write in English, just getting these people (many here illegally) to pass a EOG is a big deal.

This difference in make up of the student population (as it relates to public schools) is the difference from 50 years ago with today. No, do not try to say I am racist for what I am referecning is social-economics, which crosses all races. And what I am including is a huge difference in English as a 2nd language component of public schools today. We have always ... See More

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**Walker Kim**

Bob Jeffersonian Seriously, you created the world that they/we live in.....they only want to further the world and continue to be able to advance technology. Without education, this cause of advancement ceases to be. I attended public school during the 70s and 80s and I also grew up and was educated in Wake County Public Schools. I also graduated from high school (honors) and college here in NC with highest honors (summa cum laude). I have a husband who has undergraduate degrees and a JD degree. He is a product of Durham County Public Schools. When we were in school and when our parents be... See More

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